

Opening Statement

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Committee on Science

Hearing: *"Status of NASA's Programs"*

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Good morning. I'd like to welcome Administrator Griffin to today's hearing.

It is now four months since he first appeared before this Committee as NASA Administrator.

Since that time, there have been a lot of changes both to NASA's programs and to the NASA institution. We need to hear about those changes.

In addition, there were a number of important questions left unanswered at that hearing.

And NASA's attempts to answer them have raised additional questions - some of which I hope will be addressed at today's hearing.

When this Committee held a hearing earlier this year on NASA's FY 2006 budget request and the President's exploration initiative, I said:

"I for one support the President's proposal if it is paid for and is sustainable." I stand by that statement.

However, I am very concerned that this Administration may not be willing to pay for the Vision that it presented to the nation 21 months ago. And I fear that the approach being taken to move the Vision forward over the near term may make it very difficult to sustain the initiative beyond 2008.

The result is that I believe we are no closer to a national consensus on the President's Vision for Space Exploration than we were 21 months ago. That is unfortunate, but I believe that is the reality.

Why do I say that? About a month ago, NASA released its plan for carrying out the exploration initiative.

From a program management standpoint, it seemed to me to be a sensible plan:

- it maximized the use of existing technology;
- it narrowed the focus of the exploration program to achieving the President's goal of putting American astronauts' boots back on the Moon by 2020, and;
- it appeared to fit within the Administration's proposed exploration budget.

Given the constraints laid down by the Administration, it appeared to be the most efficient means of meeting the President's goal. And I think Administrator Griffin and his team are to be commended for their efforts. Yet, it leads to the basic question of "are we doing the right thing - or just doing the thing right?" That is, should simply getting to the Moon under the Administration's timetable be the nation's goal?

Or should the goal be to craft a long-term human and robotic exploration program that spawns new technologies, engages the best and brightest in our universities, and nurtures the R&D capabilities that will be needed to meet long-term exploration goals, as well as carry out NASA's other important missions?

Those are not idle questions, given that NASA is proposing to spend more than \$100 billion over the next 15 years to get those astronauts' boots back on the Moon. And given that the leader of NASA's Exploration Systems Architecture Study recently acknowledged that the \$100 billion doesn't fund more than a couple of brief lunar visits.

He also confirmed that the assumption of limiting NASA's exploration budget beyond 2010 to inflationary growth - something the Administration cited when it announced the exploration Vision to demonstrate its "affordability" - won't get anyone to Mars. To quote him: *"When you try to fit within a wedge like that, you're not going to have a human Mars program if you extend that out."*

If that's the case, then it puts a premium on NASA having compelling answers for the questions: *"Why do we need to go back to the Moon on NASA's proposed schedule - and what are we going to do when we get there?"*

I hope that Administrator Griffin can provide those answers today, but I would caution him that he is likely to face a skeptical audience in the Congress as a whole.

That skepticism is likely to increase when the benefits of following NASA's plan are weighed against its costs to NASA's other programs. For example, while it is certainly commendable that the Administrator wants to carry out the exploration Vision within the budgetary profile he has been given by OMB, that profile puts NASA's aeronautics program on a path of continued significant decline through at least the remainder of the decade.

While his intent is to not take money from NASA's science programs to support the exploration Vision, the reality is that NASA's life science programs are being gutted as we speak, and non-exploration-related research is being eliminated from the International Space Station program.

And in an attempt to reduce the size of the "gap" between the forced retirement of the Shuttle and the eventual deployment of the Crew Exploration Vehicle, the agency is slashing its commitment to a variety of research and technology programs.

Finally, just weeks after NASA announced its goal of "essentially completing" the International Space Station, it appears that OMB guidance to NASA is putting that goal in serious jeopardy.

My intent in citing these examples is not to criticize Administrator Griffin. Rather, it is to make clear that only 21 months into the Vision, NASA has already had to make *major* cuts to programs and contemplate additional restructurings simply to have the hope of meeting the President's timetable for returning U.S. astronauts to the Moon.

That does not bode well for the sustainability of the Vision. And it raises the fundamental question: Is the Vision for Space Exploration an *Administration* priority - or simply a *NASA* priority?

As you know, just one year after the President announced his Vision for NASA, the White House cut NASA's outyear funding plan by over \$2.5 billion. That simply worsened an already existing mismatch between NASA's programs and its budget.

When the Administration put forth its "sand chart" 21 months ago to demonstrate the "affordability" of its exploration Vision, it assumed deep reductions in the funding required for the Shuttle program in the years prior to its retirement. The realism of achieving those Shuttle cost reductions was questionable, but OMB and NASA kept them in their budget plan.

And what's the result? NASA now has a more than \$3 billion budgetary shortfall in the Shuttle account to deal with over the next several years as a result of OMB's and NASA's desire to construct a budgetary plan that would support the Vision. And that shortfall could have a major impact on NASA's ability to meet its commitments to the International Space Station program, among other things.

Is the White House going to find the resources to correct for its earlier "low-balling" of Shuttle budgetary requirements? Is the White House going to ensure that the ISS is a facility that truly is an integral part of the Vision and that meets our commitments to our International Partners? I hope so. But if not, it will be a telling sign that this Administration is distancing itself from its commitment to the exploration Vision and leaving it to NASA to pick up the pieces.

Well, I hope that Administrator Griffin will be able to shed some light on these issues today. I again want to welcome him to our hearing, and I look forward to his testimony.